One more time

—"Now that the truth is just a rule that you can bend

You crack the whip, shape-shift and trick the past again."

Metric - Black Sheep

The days leading up to the weekend were a masterclass in slow-motion torture. William's back burned with a constant, tight heat, the protective film beneath his clothes a physical reminder of the lines Nut had permanently anchored into his skin. Every time he lifted a heavy equipment case or reached up to adjust a lighting diffuser, the raw, freshly shaded translucent petals of the Skeleton Flower flexed against the tight plastic wrap, sending a sharp, biting sting across his shoulders.

But he welcomed the pain; it was a grounding, visceral anchor that temporarily quieted the screaming anxiety in his mind, keeping him from drowning entirely in the silent terror of his impending confession.

He couldn't slouch anymore; the raw ink forced him to stand with his broad shoulders squared, a rigid, unmasked silhouette that Est's eyes tracked with a terrifying, silent intensity across every set they worked. William was trying to be a ghost, but by standing tall, he had never been more visible.

Est was drowning in a profound, dizzying sense of déjà vu that made him feel like he was losing his mind.

He had achieved the exact peace he had been starving for; by choosing to let go of the blurry warehouse night, he had finally allowed his mind to breathe. The mystery man was safely tucked away in the past.

Yet, his body and his skin refused to cooperate with his mind's decision.

His eyes kept drifting toward William's hands, the specific angle of his broad frame, the sheer, unyielding presence of the man standing by the wardrobe racks. Every time Est tried to step within that comfortable, unwritten boundary to close the distance, William pulled away, offering nothing but a shallow, polite distance. William was there, but he wasn't there. He was carrying out his duties with a mechanical precision that made Est's chest ache with an unexplainable sense of mourning.

He had laid the mystery man to rest, so why did it feel like William was the one who had died?

By the time the weekend finally arrived, the suffocating atmosphere of the studio shifted to the quiet sanctuary of Est's apartment.

The afternoon light drifted softly through the high glass windows, a gentle contrast to the blinding, artificial harshness of the commercial sets. A few hours before the neon chaos of the weekend was set to swallow them, Est's apartment was remarkably quiet.

The soft afternoon light caught the steam rising from the two coffee mugs settled between him and Hong on the low coffee table.

"It's a good opportunity, you know," Hong said softly, breaking the silence as he leaned back against the cushions. "You haven't spoken to Lego or Tui in person since everything went down. Tonight is the night to clear the air."

Est stared down into his dark coffee, his reflection warped by the liquid. "I know," he murmured, his voice tight. "I want to do it. It's just... I still feel sick to my stomach when I think about how I treated Lego."

"They don't hate you, Est," Hong said gently. A small, knowing smile touched his lips as he pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. He slid the device across the wooden coffee table. "Besides, you have some serious catching up to do. Look."

Est looked down at the display.

The photograph was vibrant, capturing Lego and Tui standing in front of a massive, freshly painted mural outside a local LGBT storefront. Lego's face was radiant, his dark hair catching the sunlight, his platform shoes planted firmly on the concrete as he wrapped his arms around Tui's waist. Tui looked completely at ease, his hand resting on Lego's shoulder, his black-painted nails catching the light.

The sight of Lego's smile didn't bring relief; it brought a familiar, sharp twist of a knife to Est's chest. The guilt of how he had used Lego—how he had looked right through him in that cafeteria, searching for a ghost—surged back with a vengeance. But the worst part wasn't just the memory. It was the realization Hong had dropped casually over dinner: Lego knew.

He had known all along. Ever since that afternoon in the workplace cafeteria, when Est had looked right through him while searching for a ghost, Lego had seen the truth. He had swallowed his own hurt just to let Est heal on his own terms.

Est stared into his coffee, his reflection warped by the dark liquid. He had achieved the peace he thought he wanted, but it felt unearned.

His mind instantly flashed to William at the studio—the way William had pulled away every time Est tried to get close, the way his hands had trembled when Est thanked him for his kindness.

"Est?" Hong's gentle voice broke through the spiral. He reached across the table, tapping the screen of his phone where the fluorescent poster for the rave still glowed in clashing streaks of electric green and pink. "Hey, Stop thinking. Tonight is about leaving the ghosts behind, remember? Let's go drown the noise."

Est swallowed the lump in his throat, looking toward the window where the soft afternoon light was beginning to fade.

He didn't want to think anymore. He wanted to run.

"Yeah," Est lied softly, forcing a nod.

Across the city, the afternoon light faded into a completely different kind of quiet inside William's apartment.

William stood in the center of his room, freshly showered and shirtless, the cool air from the AC unit doing nothing to soothe the persistent, tight heat radiating across his back. The water had re-awakened the sharp sting of the ink, making the intricate outline of the Skeleton Flower throb against his skin.

He was staring at the floor, trapped in the same hollow numbness that had carried him through the work week.

The silence didn't last.

A sharp, rhythmic knock rattled his front door.

When he swung it open, Lego practically swept past him, a sharp burst of alternative defiance against the dim apartment.

Lego was already entirely dressed for the evening, a walking declaration of the oblivion they were all chasing tonight. He wore an oversized, open sweatshirt slouched over a dark tank top, paired with shorts, dangerously frayed ripped tights, and heavy platform shoes anchored by high socks. His face was framed by sharp, dark streaks of black makeup, silver accessories glinting under the hallway light, and a set of perfectly glossy black nails clamped around an iced tea in one hand and his wallet in the other.

"You're not even dressed yet," Lego observed, taking a sip of his tea and setting it on the nearest counter without ceremony. He looked William up and down, his eyes softening as they locked onto the raw expanse of his broad shoulders. "Nut told me your wrap would be peeling by now."

William offered a low, grateful murmur, settling onto the edge of his bed.

Lego snapped his wallet shut, pulling a fresh sheet of medical-grade dermal

dressing. His black-nailed fingers were surprisingly gentle as he peeled back the adhesive, stepping behind William's frame.

As Lego carefully smoothed the clear, protective film over the raw, freshly shaded translucent petals of the flower, the plastic crinkled slightly against the skin, sealing the heat beneath it.

"He's going to be there, you know," Lego said softly into the quiet room, his voice dropping its usual energetic edge. He didn't need to specify who he was. "You ready for this?"

William closed his eyes, his broad shoulders squaring involuntarily as the fresh dressing tightened against his skin. He could feel the countdown ticking away in his pulse.

"I know," William muttered, his voice rough. "I just need one night, Lego. One night where I'm just a ghost in the crowd."

Lego smoothed down the final edge of the plastic dressing over William's shoulder blade, tapping it twice with a glossy black nail to ensure it adhered perfectly to the skin.

"I get it. One more night," Lego said, though his voice lacked its usual teasing bite.

William gave a low hum of appreciation as he carefully stood up, his shoulders forced into that rigid, straight line to keep the fresh ink from pulling. Moving on autopilot, he walked over to the bathroom mirror to finish getting ready.

Lego followed him without invitation, leaning comfortably against the doorframe with his iced tea still in hand. There was a well-worn, effortless comfort to their friendship—a platonic intimacy.

As William methodically went through his skincare routine, smoothing a cooling moisturizer over his face to combat the exhaustion etched under his eyes, Lego set his drink down.

Lego pulled out a comb.

"Turn around," Lego ordered softly.

William didn't argue. He lowered his frame slightly, letting Lego work the comb through his hair with surprisingly practiced, gentle strokes. Lego's silver rings clinked softly against the plastic comb, his black-painted fingers a stark visual contrast against William's dark hair.

It was a quiet ritual of care, a grounding distraction that slowly began to ease the tight, screaming anxiety that had coiled in William's chest all week. With every stroke of the comb, the heavy, clinical mask of the studio assistant slipped a little

further away.

When they finished, the stifling heat of the Bangkok evening had officially swallowed the sunset, prompting them to step out onto William's small balcony.

The city below was a sprawling grid of white and red headlights, the low, distant hum of traffic rising to meet them. They stood side by side in the humid air.

"Est feels sick about how he treated you," William admitted quietly, his eyes tracking a solitary skytrain threading through the distant concrete jungle. "Hong told me he's still carrying it."

Lego leaned his elbows on the concrete railing, his frayed, ripped tights catching the glow of the streetlights below. He took a slow sip of his iced tea before answering.

"Est used me like a lot of other people have. It's nothing new," Lego said, his tone remarkably devoid of malice. "I knew it in the cafeteria. I chose to let him do it because Hong seemed to like him a lot. But my loyalty was never to his delusion, Liam. It was to you. It still is."

William swallowed past the dryness in his throat, the tight heat of the Skeleton Flower on his back a constant, throbbing reminder of his countdown.

"He's trying to leave the ghosts behind tonight," he murmured.

"Then let him try," Lego said softly, turning to look at his friend's profile. "But you can't play a role forever, William. Sooner or later, the truth always comes out."

The heavy weight of the conversation was suddenly broken at exactly 9:30 PM by the sharp buzz of the apartment intercom. A few moments later, the front door swung open, and Tui stepped into the apartment, bringing a wave of grounded, easy warmth with him.

He was already entirely dressed for the evening, wearing faded ripped jeans and a worn white t-shirt with a striking blue Nirvana print draped loosely over his frame. In his hands, he carried a stack of takeout containers, the rich, savory scent of Thai street food instantly filling the dim apartment.

"I brought fuel," Tui announced with a warm smile, setting the food on the small kitchen table.

As he reached out to give Lego a kiss, Lego stood on his tiptoes and put his hand around Tui's waist. The apartment lights caught Tui's hands—his nails were painted a glossy black, a perfect, intentional match to Lego's own manicure.

It was a quiet, unbothered testament to the life they were building together outside of the group.

Lego's face instantly lit up, the dark streaks of his makeup softening as he leaned into Tui's touch.

"Perfect timing," Lego said, his voice warm. "Nut said William's back is technically a masterpiece, but he's acting like a man on death row."

Tui looked over at William, his expression shifting to one of quiet, understanding solidarity. He didn't ask demanding questions; he simply pulled out a chair and popped the lid off a container of noodles.

"Eat first," Tui said gently, gesturing to the table. "If we're going to lose ourselves in the noise tonight, we might as well do it on a full stomach."

Sitting down with his friends, wrapped in a protective circle of the people who actually knew the radioactive truth, William felt a temporary reprieve.

Across the city, Est was mourning a ghost.

But here, under the dim kitchen light, eating dinner with Lego and Tui, William allowed himself to just exist for one final hour.

One more hour before the neon took over.

By 11:00 PM, the quiet sanctuary of the kitchen table was completely obliterated by the industrial, pulse-pounding chaos of the venue.

The rave was hosted in an old, hollowed-out warehouse on the outskirts of the city, its concrete walls sweating from the sheer density of the crowd and the heavy tropical humidity. Outside, the bass was a low, seismic rumble that vibrated through the soles of William's shoes; inside, it became a living entity, a relentless wall of sound that thudded directly against his ribs.

William stood near the edge of the secondary bar, away from the worst of the crushing bodies. He had chosen a dark, oversized button-down shirt over a breathable tank top—the loose fabric kept from sticking to his back, but the constant movement of the crowd meant that occasionally, someone would brush past his shoulders, sending a sharp, electric sting of pain straight down his spine.

He didn't mind. The biting heat of the healing ink was the only thing keeping him grounded in the sensory overload.

"Drink," Lego said, appearing at his elbow and pressing a cold bottle of water into his hand.

Under the flashing, disorienting streaks of electric green and hot pink strobes, Lego's black makeup looked sharp, almost predatory, his silver accessories glinting

every time the lights swept over them.

Tui stood just behind him, a steady, calm anchor in the shifting crowd, his glossy black nails wrapped around a drink of his own.

William took a slow sip, his eyes scanning the sea of moving bodies on the main floor.

"Thanks."

"You doing okay?" Tui asked, leaning in close so his voice could carry over the screaming synth track echoing from the massive speaker stacks. "We can move to the outdoor terrace if it's too tight in here."

"I'm fine," William replied, forcing his voice to remain steady. He kept his broad shoulders squared, his posture perfectly rigid.

A few yards away, near the entrance of the main dance floor, the crowd parted slightly as a group stepped through the heavy vinyl curtains.

It was Hong first, laughing at something over his shoulder, his face illuminated by a sudden burst of strobe light.

And right behind him, pulling at the collar of his shirt as if the humid air was already choking him, was Est.

William's breath caught in his throat, the water bottle freezing against his palm.

Through the flashing, chaotic shadows of the warehouse, Est's eyes were already darting restlessly through the crowd, searching for something—or someone—he couldn't quite name.

Both of them were entering this rave with the exact same goal—to escape the crushing weight of their respective realities and "just exist."

But their escapes were fundamentally incompatible.

Est was running toward his friends to celebrate a blank slate.

William was running away from the truth to enjoy his final hours as a ghost.

In the middle of the crowded dance floor, the strobes switched to a steady, rhythmic pulse. The humidity in the venue mimicked a tropical storm—the air was thick, wet, and heavy.

Est got separated from Hong in the crowd. He turned, disoriented, and bumped directly into a solid, unyielding chest. A steady hands immediately gripped Est's

wrists to steady him from falling into the rushing crowd.

A sudden sense of déjà vu sent shivers down Est's spine.

He had buried the mysterious man, but as he gazed at William under the neon lights, his body began to rebel against the lie.

The countdown had officially begun, and the din of the party could no longer drown out the growing tension between them.

The electric green and hot pink strobes pulsed with a heavy, clinical regularity, casting long, fractured shadows across William's face. Up close, the thick, tropical humidity of the warehouse made Est's skin sheen with sweat, his breath coming in shallow, ragged gasps as he stared up into the dark eyes of William.

William didn't let go. His hands remained wrapped firmly around Est's wrists, his grip a steady, grounding anchor that kept Est from being swept away by the crushing momentum of the dancing crowd.

But the contact was costing him.

To hold Est steady while remaining perfectly upright, William had to lock his core and throw his broad shoulders back. Beneath his dark jacket, the motion caused his clothes to rub harshly against the fresh dermal wrap, sending a sharp, biting sting across the raw translucent petals of the Skeleton Flower.

The physical pain flared hot and demanding, a visceral reminder that he couldn't slouch, couldn't hide, and couldn't run. Est's gaze dropped instinctively to the fingers locking him in place, tracking the specific angle of William's broad frame.

A profound, dizzying wave of déjà vu crashed over him, so violent it made the concrete floor beneath his feet feel like it was tilting.

He had achieved the exact peace he had been starving for. He had told himself—convinced himself—that the blurry warehouse night was a fragment of the past, a ghost he had successfully laid to rest.

Yet, his body flatly refused to cooperate with his mind's decision.

His pulse hammered wildly against the literal brackets of William's palms, his skin remembering a heavy, unyielding presence that the clinical, polite distance of the studio assistant had tried so hard to erase.

Est swallowed hard, the suffocating atmosphere of the rave tightening around them until the flashing crowd completely faded into a blur. The illusion of his clean slate was burning away in the heat of William's grip.

"Hey! Found him!"

The spell shattered instantly. A hand clamped down on Est's shoulder, pulling him backward and breaking the intoxicating, suffocating gravity of William's hold.

Est blinked, his vision swimming as the strobe lights rushed back into focus. Hong was standing there, a wide, relieved grin on his face as he held two sweating plastic cups of alcohol. Hooked firmly to Hong's other hand, fingers intimately intertwined, was Nut.

The tattoo artist looked effortlessly cool in the neon glare, giving a casual nod of his head as he took a sip of his own drink.

"Man, the center of the floor is a total dead zone," Hong shouted over the pounding electronic bass, extending one of the drinks toward Est. "You vanished into thin air. Thank god William caught you."

William's hands dropped instantly to his sides. He took a half-step back into the shadows of a speaker stack. The fabric dragged against his fresh ink with a sharp, biting sting, but his face remained a mask of mechanical distance.

Est's hand shook slightly as he took the cup from Hong. He didn't drink. He kept his eyes locked on William, silently pleading for an explanation, but William was looking directly at Hong.

"Where are Lego and Tui?" Hong asked, looking around the immediate vicinity of the secondary bar. "Nut said they came with you, William. We've been looking all over for them. Est really wants to talk to them."

"They were here a minute ago," William replied, his voice a low, rough murmur that barely carried over the screaming synths. He didn't look at Est. "They must have drifted toward the main floor."

"Come on, let's go find them before the headliner starts," Hong said, tugging Est's arm. "Tonight is about clearing the air, remember?"

Est swallowed hard, forcing a tight nod as he let himself be led away from William's unyielding silhouette.

But as they pushed through the thick, wet humidity of the crowded venue, William followed a few paces behind, a silent, towering shadow that Est could feel in his nerves.

They reached the cavernous main bar, where the subwoofers vibrated so violently that speaking was nearly impossible. Through the chemical haze, Nut suddenly pointed a finger toward the far end of the counter.

Tui was standing there, his faded Nirvana t-shirt catching the pink light as he spoke animatedly with a guy carrying a professional camera rig—one of the event's official photographers.

"Tui!" Hong yelled, forcing his way through the barrier of bodies.

Tui turned, his expression shifting to one of easy, grounded warmth as he recognized the group. As he lifted a hand to greet them, the bar lights caught his glossy black nails.

"Have you seen Lego?" Est asked quickly, his voice tight with an urgency he couldn't hide. He needed to apologize. He needed to fix something, anything, to stop the dizzying spiral in his head.

Tui had to lean in close, the music obliterating their voices. "He went outside!" Tui shouted back, gesturing toward a set of heavy fire doors near the back exit.

"My girlfriend went with him—they wanted to grab a smoke!" The man carrying the professional camera equipment says.

Nut nodded toward the doors. "Let's go. I need actual oxygen anyway."

They moved as a unit, pushing past and stepping out into the outdoor courtyard. The punishing roar of the bass dropped to a muffled, heavy thudding against the concrete walls, finally allowing their ears to breathe.

The air out here was still warm, but a light breeze swept through the open-air alleyway, which had been converted into a makeshift lounge. Strung-up fairy lights cast a low, amber glow over a cluster of mismatched furniture—old, faded velvet armchairs and plastic lawn chairs arranged near a pair of brightly lit food trucks emitting the rich scent of fried garlic and grilled meat.

At a low metal table tucked into a corner near the brick wall, the photographer's girlfriend was laughing, leaning back in a worn wooden chair.

Sitting right next to her was Lego.

He looked entirely in his element. He had slouched his oversized sweatshirt off one shoulder, his dangerously frayed ripped tights stretched out as he hooked his platform shoes over the crossbar of the table.

Held firmly between his fingers—his glossy black nails contrasting sharply with the white paper—was a half-rolled cigarette. With practice Lego brought the paper to his lips, slowly licking the adhesive edge to seal it.

He didn't look up as the fire doors clapped shut behind the group, completely unbothered by the world, a living testament to a life entirely separate from the ghosts Est was so desperately chasing.

The photographer's girlfriend leaned down, pressing a warm goodbye kiss against Lego's painted cheek before grabbing her drink and heading back toward the indoor chaos.

As the boys approached the table, Lego's face softened. Without a word, he raised his hand, his glossy black nails catching the amber glow of the fairy lights as he easily slipped his fingers into Tui's waiting palm.

Tui stepped in close.

As Est drew nearer, the sharp, distinct scent of weed hit his senses, mixing with the humid Bangkok night air and the distant smell of street food from the trucks.

Hong let out a soft laugh, leaning across the weathered metal table. He pulled a cigarette from his own pack and tapped the tip against Lego's lighter, inhaling deeply until the orange cherry glowed to life. Hong exhaled a plume of gray smoke into the night, his eyes shifting meaningfully from Lego to Est.

He gave a quiet, encouraging nod.

It was the cue. The moment to clear the air.

Est swallowed past the sudden dryness in his throat. He felt entirely exposed, caught between the comforting, unbothered reality of Lego's new life and the rigid, towering shadow of William standing just at the edge of the courtyard light.

The adrenaline from the dance floor was still humming in his veins, but he forced himself to step forward.

When he started talking, the words didn't come out polished; they pushed out of him like a flood, desperate and heavy with the weight of his own thoughts.

"Lego... I'm so sorry," Est began, his voice tight, his eyes fixed on the scratched metal of the table because looking at Lego's content expression made his chest ache. "I'm sorry for lying to you. I wanted to figure out who I slept with the night at the warehouse, and I looked right through you in the cafeteria. And then I ghosted you because I couldn't face the guilt of what I did."

He poured everything out, stripping away his pride in front of the entire group. He apologized for the manipulation, for the silence, and for the unfair burden he had placed on Lego's shoulders just to heal on his own terms.

Lego didn't interrupt. He simply sat there, casually holding Tui's hand, his thumb tracing a slow, rhythmic circle over Tui's knuckles as he let Est finish.

There was no anger in his eyes, no defensive posture.

When Est finally ran out of breath, the silence of the courtyard settled over them, punctuated only by the distant, muffled thud of the warehouse bass.

Lego took a slow drag of his rolled cigarette, exhaling the smoke into the breeze before giving a small, remarkably peaceful shrug.

"If Hong trusts you, then I do too," Lego said softly, He offered a small, knowing smile.

The words were meant to bring liberation. They were supposed to grant Est the exact peace and blank slate he had been starving for. But as Est stood there, the weight of the apology accepted, his mind instantly flashed backward.

Lego had forgiven him. The past with Lego was clean.

Which meant the suffocating, terrifying tension remaining in the air didn't belong to the past at all.

It belonged entirely to the man standing right behind him.

Slowly, Est turned his head, his eyes searching the shadows for William.

Hong took one last drag, pressing the glowing ember of his cigarette against the metal rim of a nearby trash bin before tossing the filter away. He looked between the group, oblivious to the silent tectonic shift happening right in front of him.

"Alright, air is officially clear," Hong declared with a bright, satisfied grin. "Who wants another drink?"

"Definitely," Est murmured quickly, his voice a little too urgent. He wanted the alcohol. He wanted to drown the sudden, terrifying clarity threatening to tear through his chest. He wanted to forget everything, even if only for an hour.

Tui nodded, wrapping an arm around Lego's waist before letting go to follow Hong. Nut nudged William's shoulder, gesturing toward the bar, and William complied without a word.

As the guys filed back through the heavy fire doors into the pulsing heat of the venue, Est stayed behind, anchored to the concrete courtyard.

He wasn't entirely alone. Lego remained sitting at the low table, the smoke from his rolled cigarette twisting lazily into the amber fairy lights. The heavy, muffled thud of the electronic music leaked out from the warehouse walls, killing any chance of an ordinary conversation, but the silence between them didn't need words.

Lego leaned back, his sharp, dark streaks of black eye makeup catching the light as he tilted his head, studying Est with a terrifyingly perceptive gaze.

"Are you going to act like you don't know?" Lego asked softly, his voice cutting straight through the dull roar of the party.

Est didn't try to lie. Not to Lego, not out here in the quiet air. He looked past Lego's shoulder, his eyes tracking the glass doors where William's broad, rigid frame was still visible near the interior bar, talking quietly with Nut.

"Yeah," Est admitted, his voice full of a raw, quiet sincerity. "For today, I am. His hands... they're still exactly the same. I'm sure he has a reason for pretending right now, just like I did."

It was a staggering, heavy realization.

William remembered everything—every detail of the blurry warehouse night, every shift of the shadow. Est only half-remembered the fractured pieces, his body filling in the blanks his mind had tried so hard to bury.

Yet, neither of them spoke of it.

Both of them had their reasons to keep the armor on.

But as Est watched William stand beneath the neon light a deep, confusing ache bloomed in Est's chest. William was exactly the same as he was on that first night. Est knew he should probably feel angry but looking at William, he just felt profoundly, devastatingly confused.

The heavy fire doors clapped open again, cutting off the heavy spiral of his thoughts.

Hong approached them with a wide, effortless smile, carefully balancing a fresh round of drinks in his hands. He slipped one into Est's palm, the plastic cup cold and sweating against his fingers.

Est looked down at the alcohol, then up at Hong, and finally back toward the flashing neon interior where the bass was calling them back into the oblivion.

He forced a soft, convincing smile to touch his lips as he took a slow sip.

For one more night, he'd pretend.

Inside the warehouse, William stood by the bar, his back to the wall, his shoulders perfectly squared despite the sharp, biting sting of the healing ink beneath his jacket.

Nut leaned in close, his voice low. "You can't keep this up, Liam. Not much longer."

William's eyes tracked Est as he re-entered the venue, Hong by his side, the neon lights painting their faces in electric green and hot pink.

"I know," William said quietly. "But tonight, I just want one more night."

Nut didn't argue. He just placed a hand on William's shoulder—a silent promise that when the rain finally came, he wouldn't be alone.

Hong and Nut moved through the crowd together, their hands intertwined, completely at ease in each other's presence. They stopped near the edge of the

dance floor, Hong pulling Nut close as the bass dropped, their bodies swaying in perfect sync.

Across the room, Lego and Tui stood together, Tui's arm wrapped protectively around Lego's waist, his glossy black nails catching the light. Lego leaned into him, his head resting on Tui's shoulder, a picture of quiet, unbothered contentment.

William watched them all—his friends, his chosen family, the people who had dragged him out of the dark and refused to let him fall back in.

And then his eyes found Est. Est was standing near the bar, a drink in his hand, his gaze locked directly on William.

The bass thudded. The lights flashed. The crowd surged. But in that moment, it was just the two of them.

And William knew—with a certainty that settled deep in his bones—that the rain was coming. The skeleton flower was about to reveal all its hidden veins.

And there was nowhere left to hide.

The countdown had officially begun.

And the din of the party could no longer drown out the growing tension between Est and William.